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Kathryn Janssen

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Gospel: Feast of the Holy Family (Luke 2:22-40)

Kathryn Janssen

I love the readings that surround our celebration of Christmas. Besides the Advent candles, wreaths, Christmas lights, and manger scenes, I revel in the beautiful and humbling reminder that our God loves us so intensely that instead of just leaving some set of instructions for us to follow, this human family receives a savior. Emmanuel. Yet, Emmanuel comes to an engaged couple, not yet living together. Amid the preparations for their marriage and the merging of families, Mary is found to be with child: impregnated by the Holy Spirit. We are familiar with this story, with this family—it is the Holy Family, of course!

Now, before I give the impression that I am going to tell you what you already know about these characters, I ask you to humor me by imagining the average family in Lakeville, Minnesota, or, if you are visiting, wherever you are from. Statistics show a decreasing number of children per family, but in general, the rule of four members per family applies; I think it might be 1.4 children, so let's just round up to 2. This, I would argue, is a broadly overgeneralized rule for family size and construction. But by what else do we “measure” ourselves, our families? Economic status? Social or civil involvement? Surely not the Holy Family!

What are our preconceived notions about the Holy Family?

Pious?

Perfect?

Unrealistic?

We celebrate Mary's immaculate conception, and thereby acknowledge her sinlessness. Joseph is a bit hesitant to join in on this venture, but with the coaxing of an angel in a dream, he is convinced that he too is called to this vocation to raise the Son of God. Add to that Jesus, the Savior of the world, and, if you are anything like me, the angelic visit eliminated any resemblance of my family about thirty seconds ago! I'll admit, the Griswold family from the movie *Christmas Vacation* seems a bit closer to my own experience. I am going out on a limb to take a guess that the “average Lakeville family” seems a far cry from this very holy bunch that we have come to identify as the Holy Family. Before today I might have agreed with you, but I've looked at it a different way this time and I invite you to do the same.

What if I told you that I think God chose this family, in this arrangement, not to intimidate us by their goodness, but to illuminate the Holy in our ordinary: to enable people to see their family reflected in what it means to be a holy family?

Most obviously, we honor this family because they lovingly agreed to raise the Christ Child. Mary conceived as a virgin and gave birth to Jesus; there were shepherds, wise men, angels, and a star—true. But there's more to it than that.

How do we read the story of the Holy Family and what questions might that raise for us? I propose that there are four approaches.

First, do we celebrate the unity and oneness of family, enhanced by the life of this child, and by Joseph's tremendous capacity to love and care for Jesus as his own Son through adoption? And as a community, how do we celebrate this vocation of love with those who choose adoption?

Second, believing that Mary and Joseph had no other children, we can ask this question: Did their hearts ever ache because together they would not be cocreators in bringing a baby into the world (*Catechism* par. 500)? I imagine it was more than enough of a shared vocation to parent the Savior of the world, don't get me wrong—but after Jesus went to bed, do you suppose Mary and Joseph ever talked about this?

Third, Mary certainly experienced the gift of life. Perhaps in a way that no other woman will fully understand; yet Mary too experienced the loss of a child. It is a scenario that nears the top of “what if” fears for any parent: the suffering of a child. How can we learn from Mary and Joseph's experience of loss to support those in our parish who have lost a child?

Finally, unlike Mary, after the finding of Jesus in the temple, Joseph is no longer mentioned. Many biblical scholars conclude that this suggests that Joseph passed away sometime after Jesus was born. Although Mary continued to be a strong and active presence in the life of her son, she appears to be doing it alone. This is a tremendous role for her to have played in a culture that saw a woman without a husband or son to be powerless. Do we take opportunities to see and affirm the work and love pro-

vided by those who are single? Do we remind them or single parents of the likeness these hard-working men and women share with Mary? Those who provide pillars of love and faith to this community and others, single-handedly?

I will admit, this was a revelation for me!

Have you ever seen the Holy Family this way; through the phases of their lives as Jesus' parents?

I am convinced that the ebb and flow in the lives of the members of the family we honor today model a much broader and more human family than we might give them credit for at first glance, certainly more than the census statistics. All at once we see:

- that at the same time Mary might celebrate the joy of motherhood through childbirth, Joseph may celebrate with you in the seamless-ness and joy of adoption
- that they might ache with you and your spouse who cannot conceive
- that Mary could relate to the despair of losing a child to injustice—be that terminal illness,

gang violence, drunk driving, war, or fetal loss
- that Mary was likely both widow and single mother

By the Lord's wisdom and intricate design, Jesus was welcomed into the world in a way that every person can relate to. What seemed like one specific model is actually multidimensional and very close to home.

It is understandable that for the many of us who do not fit into this "average family," or cannot relate to the traditional story of the Nativity, these times of family gatherings where dreaded questions of children and family inevitably arise can be painful. In the spirit of Luke's gospel, and at this time when family and friends gather together with nostalgia over Monopoly and eggnog or, in true Griswold fashion, snowy roads and delayed flights, it seemed a particularly fitting time to look for and acknowledge the "holy families" in our lives, including our own.



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Jeffrey P. Regan